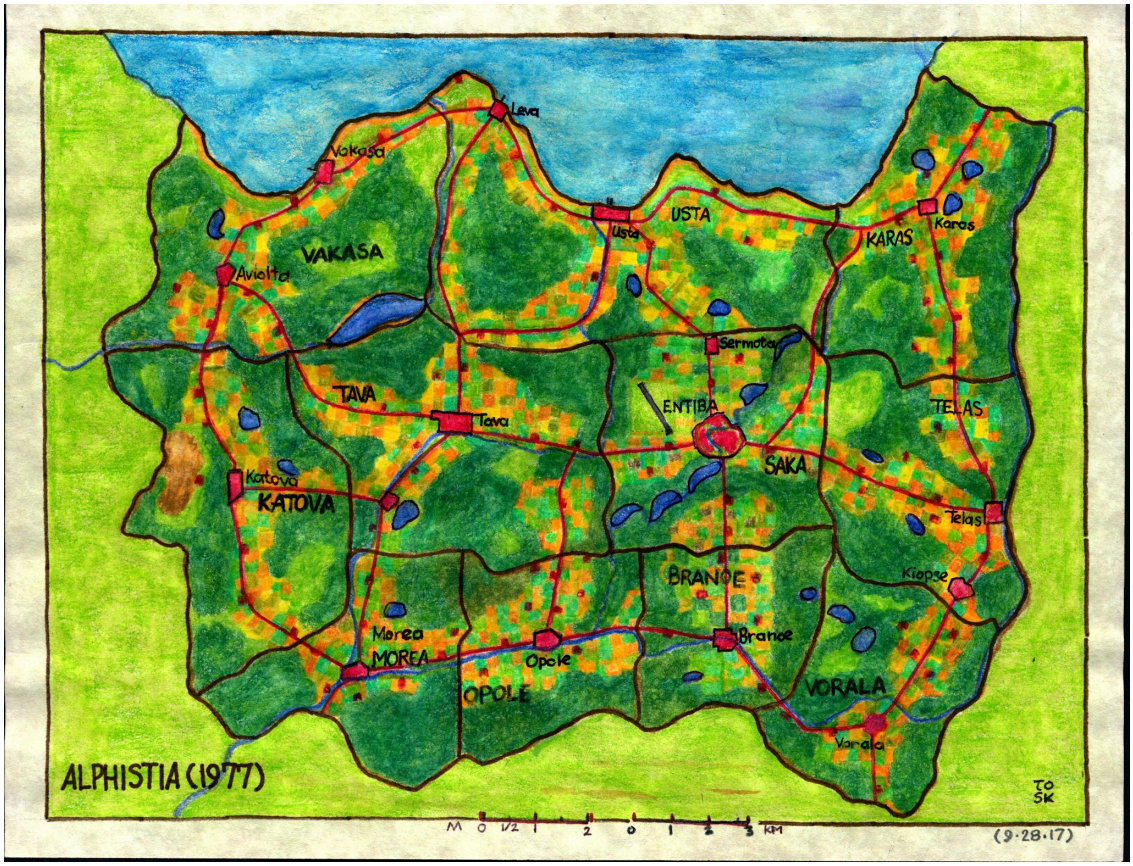
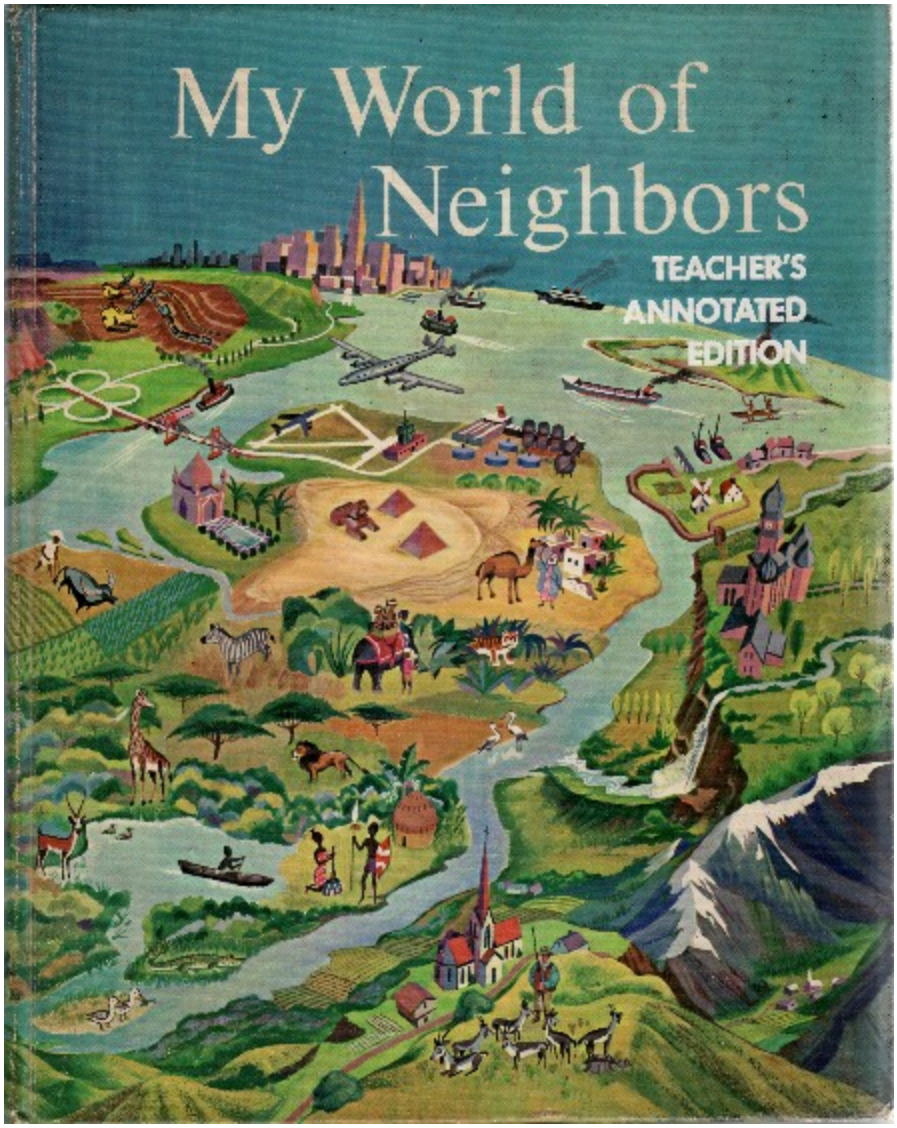


A History of Alphistia
1967-1977
By Anthony W. Skaggs

My World of Neighbors

On the first day of fourth grade at Saint Stephen's in August 1967, several textbooks sat on my desk waiting for me. My eye was drawn immediately to the geography book. The cover of "My World of Neighbors" gave me an inkling of what I was in for. It was a spectacular panoramic idealization of the world through a child's eye, with drawings of exotic locations, and all in brilliant color. The inside of the book was a travelogue around the world, visiting Catholics in distant states and faraway lands. I could hardly wait!



That book was the spark that led to a huge amount of creativity, directly resulting the creation of

Alphistia. As I read about places like Holland and Uganda, I could borrow what I liked and make my own creations. Through this book (and some others), I realized I could create my OWN little world. I first invented an alphabet, and soon after a country was born, and I called it Alphistia. My fourth grade geography book inspired me over and over. That's how the capital of Alphistia became Entiba, once we "visited" a devout Catholic family in Entebbe Uganda.

Every two weeks, my fourth grade teacher Mrs. Byers would hand out copies of the "Young Catholic Messenger", a Catholic version of "My Weekly Reader". I devoured each issue. It had all sorts of little items about foreign life, and I learned that evil Soviet Russia was celebrating its 50th anniversary, that the 3200 room Rossiya Hotel was opened in Moscow, and that hovercrafts were the FUTURE, as shown by the new service between England and France. I made my own weekly newspapers, or tried to in any case. There were several completed issues, but they disappeared along with almost every other artifact from then.

My mother was not in the slightest bit intellectual, but she loved to read, and she enjoyed going to the Newport Public Library. When I was seven, she gave me one of the best gifts ever, but she probably wasn't even aware of what it meant. She walked me over to the granite Carnegie library and registered me for a library card. It was a like giving me a passport to the whole wide world! I simply was astounded by the books I found in the children's room of that very modest library.

Other than watching the news on TV and reading the dreadful local newspapers, my mother was not engaged much with the outside world. It frightened her, and she felt most comfortable in her own home. She created a nest there, as cosy as it could be considering how depressed and frustrated she was about how life had turned out.

I was very curious about what was outside our home, going for long walks to explore Newport, and sometimes even further. I didn't get that from my mother. That's from my father. One of the few very pleasant memories I have about him was when he would drive me to look at beautiful churches in nearby towns. It gave him a chance to get out of the house and away from my mother's nagging, and it let me see the "world" beyond Putnam St. My father had seen some of the world - not a lot - but he'd had some adventures along the way. His stories about his experiences were fun to listen to. He had vivid memories about his time on Saipan, and his drive across half the country after he got out of the army in 1945. He talked to people around the world on ham radio, so he knew where different countries were, their capitals, and sometimes even a little more. He wasn't a dumb man at all, and he had a little bit of intellectual curiosity, but alcohol destroyed most of those brain cells as time went on. When he was drunk, he could be as racist and crude as any semi-literate hillbilly. Unfortunately, he was drunk a lot when I was growing up.

This unhappiness at home of course affected me: there was a LOT of yelling and screaming. I think I was able to block out some of it because I created an alternative reality for myself. I certainly used what I had at my disposal very creatively, books most of all.

My mother encouraged these creative outlets, so long as it didn't involve spending very much money (there were no private music lessons, art lessons or luxuries like that). It was clear I loved to draw, so there was always paper and crayons, watercolors, and markers for me to play with. I loved to build, so I was given Lincoln Logs and every cardboard container in the house to make my own forts and towns. I discovered that modeling clay could be used to create whole cities, so my mother cut a piece of linoleum about 20 inches square, and I would use that to make little towns with all their institutions, stores, and houses, and people them with pea-sized persons (actually just represented by pea-sized balls). I'd place them in cars, buses, and trains, create rush hours and send them to church and school, factories and farms. I would play with my clay for hours at the kitchen table while the tv blared, my mother fussed and cooked at the stove, and argued with my father.

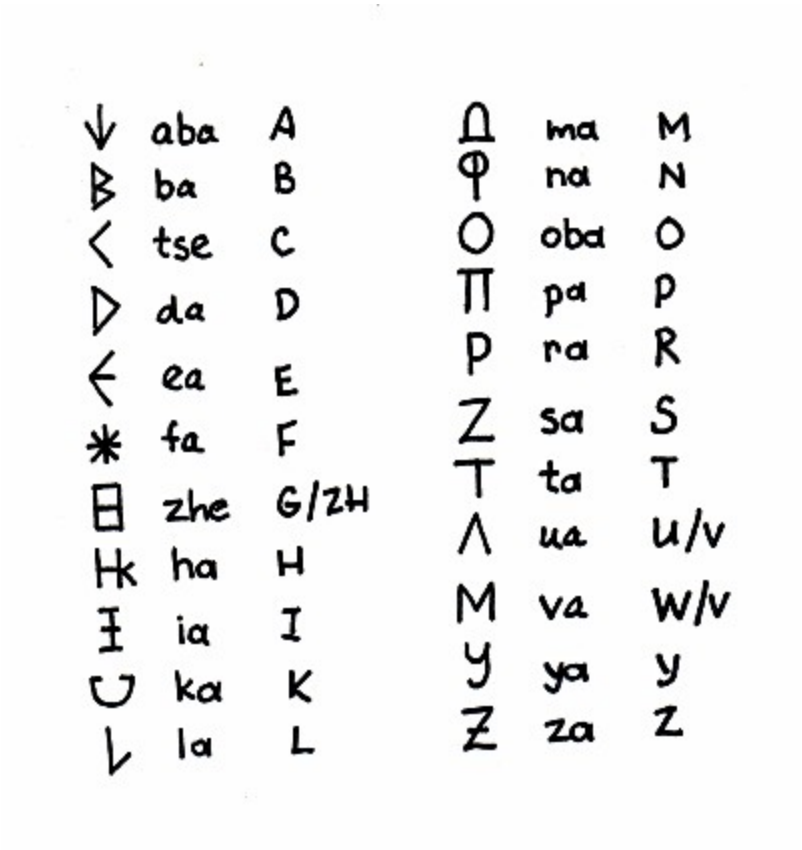
A Nation is Born

In the early 1960s, supermarkets sold a lot of book sets to customers one volume at a time, one week at a time. We had volume one of several of these: the letter A of the Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedia, the letter A of the Golden Book Encyclopedia, the ancient world volume of a set about history, and the Washington volume of the Presidents of the United States. These were usually teasers and cost less than a dollar, so my mother would buy them and give them to me. It is no accident that the country I created started with the letter "A"! My favorite article in the Funk and Wagnalls and Golden Book Encyclopedias was the one about the alphabet.

The Golden Book Encyclopedia was filled with gorgeous color drawings that influenced how I look at the world artistically to this day. Its articles were hardly scholarly, and not even particularly well-written (true of the F and W encyclopedia too). But I read them cover to cover, and borrowed additional volumes from my Aunt Betty and Uncle Nat. They had far more bourgeois pretensions than my mother, so they had the complete sets of both.

Betty had another book that also influenced my artistic sensibilities, a small book called the “Children’s Bible”. It had beautiful mid-century modern drawings of Bible scenes done by a German monk named Johannes Gruger. The colors were spectacular. I borrowed that book from my aunt for years until she finally forced me to give it back, so that it could gather dust in her own home. During one of her moves, the book was eventually tossed, and by then I wasn’t even sure of the name of it anymore. In the days before the internet, it was VERY hard to hunt down books you remembered from childhood, and I never came across a copy in a secondhand bookstore. Finally in 1998, I found a copy of it in the catalog of the Buffalo Public Library, and ordered it from Interlibrary Loan. I then made color copies of every page in the book. A few years later, I could order my own copy from ABE.com, a used bookstore aggregator online that made looking for these kinds of treasures very easy.

Sometime around Christmas of 1967, I invented my own alphabet, based on a chart I saw in the Golden Book Encyclopedia. It was influenced mostly by the Phoenician and Greek alphabets. I would spell English words with my own letters, and then pronounce the words using the Alphistian names of the letters. This was an unwieldy way to invent and speak a language, and probably irritated my mother, as I would sit at the kitchen table and spell out whole phrases using my invented letter names.



Within a few months, I realized that it was easier to simply invent new words. Some of those “ancient” words exist today (in modified form) such as: leshenum (lesenum) - native land, ulanta - beautiful, yaro (yare) - boy, nomikli(nomikle) - book. There are probably about 50 words like this, almost all of them invented out of whole cloth. I called my language “Alphan” at first, and sometime in early 1968, I started calling the language Alphistian, and my new geofictional creation: Alphistia.

Along with the ideas I was getting about the world beyond Newport from the Golden Book Encyclopedia, My World of Neighbors, and other books I was constantly borrowing from the Newport Public Library, Alphistia was born.

Ant Farm

Our backyard was crawling with ants, and I was fascinated by their industrious lives at my feet. I built anthills for them, which they ignored. I dug up some of their marvelous constructions, creating chaos for them, but I wanted to find the Queen. One time I did, but immediately felt guilty for being a mean human and covered it all up. But the dirt patch behind our house was a tiny landscape with pyramids, like those of ancient civilizations, some made by me, most the various mounds of the ants.

I soon expanded into the concrete that made up the rest of the yard, and started building miniature cities from shoeboxes, oatmeal cylinders and the like, all regularly washed away by the rain.

Before long, I'd advanced my constructions of Entiba by drawing child-sized blocks with houses etc with chalk. And then I made the leap to building a shanty town on the outlines of the buildings. And so, the Backyard Alphistia started, to my mother's dismay. For the next 6-7 years or so, she in turn tolerated or threw out my constructions. Finally she figured out that replacing all of it with a three foot high swimming pool would create a diversion, and my shanty town was carted away for good in the early summer of 1973.

I think the ants were relieved not to be bothered by me anymore as well.

"Real Existing" Alphistia

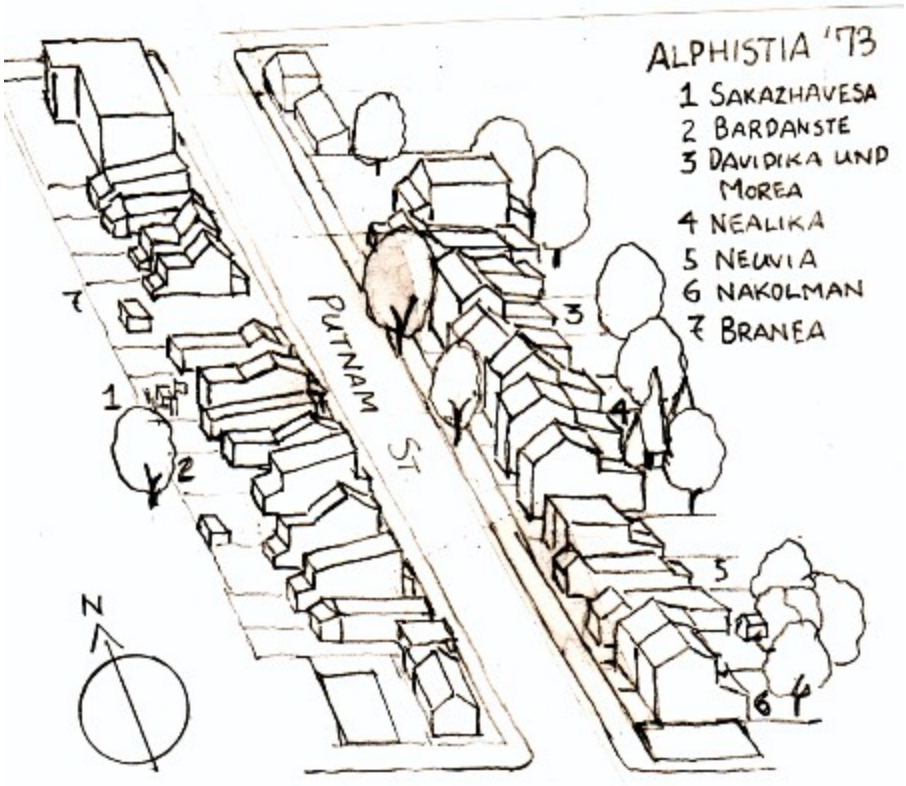
My father opened a shoe repair shop in the nearby town of Covington sometime in 1966. It was an act of desperation, because he was not a good fit in any job where he was someone's underling. While he could be his own boss in his own store, and really was a craftsman at being a cobbler, he had terrible business skills. His biggest mistake was to miss deadlines and make his customers wait too long to get their shoes back. He told me once how a man came in begging to get his shoes, which of course weren't ready. My father told him to come back in a few days. The man exclaimed "James, I have to be at a funeral in an hour!" Things like this meant my father barely eked out a living.

About the same time, my mother began boarding two little girls: Kim and Lisa. They were the children of one of my mom's friends. Her marriage had soured, and before long, she became a local prostitute. The girls needed to be out of the way, and coincidentally, in a better environment than what their mother could give them. Later, when their half-brother Gene was born, he came to stay with us too. This unusual arrangement provided a steady income for my mom, which was good because my father simply was not a good provider. The house though was full again, first with two, and (after 1969) three more kids living in it. These kids and myself

were the “core” Alphistian “citizenry”.

Most of the neighboring houses had children living in them and they became my natural playmates. Most important in Alphistia’s history, were the kids living two doors south of us: Barbara, Danny, and Steve. They were fine about being a part of child’s play that included kings and queens, princesses and princes, battles with plastic swords etc. Even better, they helped me build the shanty towns in the backyard.

Once I moved from the ants to the cemented area next to the dirt patch, I declared 924 Putnam Street a province with the name of Sakazhavesa, and the backyard of our house became the capital of Alphistia: Entiba. I created other provinces too, and the house south with Barb, Dan, and Steve became Bardanste. This all happened sometime in 1968.



Other houses were “honorary” provinces, since their inhabitants probably did not even know of Alphistia’s existence. There was Nealika, where Mrs Pearl Neal lived. She was a sweet old lady who was a good friend of my mother. For a time there was Sutrada, which was named after the South family living directly opposite us. And there was Davidika und Moria, named after Mrs Hazel Davis and her sister Lola Moore. They were two older ladies who doted on me and were fascinated by the various Alphistian artifacts I made and gave them as gifts.

At the most there were seven or eight provinces, but only the kids really paid any attention to

any of it, except for flare ups when parents or other adults would get involved. One older woman down the street, Nellie Martin, occasionally tried to referee some of the arguments that erupted, but not very successfully.

Spor and Sporess

The leader of Alphistia was called the Spor. This came from the abbreviation S.P.Q.R. (the Latin abbreviation for “Senate and People of Rome”). I saw it in various movies and books about Ancient Rome. The leader was not elected: he was me, as the founder of Alphistia. There was only one election in Alphistia, and it did not turn out as I expected.

I appointed a girl as the “Sporess”, which was a (clever?) feminization of the word Spor. Most of the time the Sporess was Barb, but when I was mad at her and her brothers, I would appoint Kim or Lisa to replace her.

Once Alphistia became virtual, the words Spor and Sporess more or less fell into disuse. In the 1990s though, Spor began to be used again. Since then it refers to the elected leader of the country, male or female. The Spor is a member of the Kilrete, and becomes leader if his/her party receives the most votes in an election, or he/she is the leader of the largest party in a coalition government.

Kilreti

The Kilrete is the Alphistian parliament, and is derived from the word “ancient” Alphistian word *Kilreti*. The origin of Kilreti is unknown, but the word came into use around the same time as Spor and Sporess did. Meetings of the Kilreti usually took place on the porch of 924 Putnam St or in the open area of the backyard. There never was a dedicated building/shanty for it. The Kilreti consisted of anyone active in Alphistia, which was primarily the kids from Bardanste, Kim and Lisa, and myself. At one point, Nellie Martin from up the street participated too, but mostly as a peacemaker between me and the other kids.

One of the oldest words in Alphistian is “lesenum”, which means “native land”. The original word was “leshenum”. I have no idea where this word came from, but it was common even when the Alphistian alphabet was still in use (before 1971).

Perantes

At some point in 1970, my mother bought me a small mimeograph machine. It printed handbills 3 inches by 5 inches in size. It was clunky and very messy to use. When she gave it to me, I thought I’d be printing out booklets and newspapers by the pound. I do remember printing out at least one mini-newspaper. Mostly though, I used my mimeograph to print out thousands of perantes. It didn’t take long for the citizens of Bardanste and other kids on Putnam St to have wads of perantes in their pockets. The immediate effect was a German-style inflation.

Since there was next to nothing to buy in Alphistia, the stacks of cash I paid each Alphistian were less than worthless. Each active citizen (myself, Barbara, Danny, and Steve, Kim and Lisa)

were paid a small stack of bills each month for their various ministerial posts. A package of potato chips cost more than a month's salary though, so there were problems not just with supply and demand, but price-fixing. Steve had been appointed as postal inspector general, and had hoped to follow his parents' advice on thriftiness. But when he went inside the Alphistian Department Store and saw the exorbitant prices, he was reduced to tears.

One scheme I came up with was to sell perantes for "foreign exchange" to "tourists". Our only interested tourist though was Hanky, one of the neighborhood kids who was never part of Alphistia. For some reason, he willingly exchanged a few dollars for perantes. No more than two or three dollars, but that was a princely sum for me at the time. I don't think he got anything with his perantes, except perhaps that bag of potato chips. The hard currency did not end up in the vault of the Bank of Alphistia, either.

Later some pengoes and perantes were buried in boxes in the backyard. Most likely dampness from rain and snow long ago destroyed the artifacts. None of the other stacks of perante notes survived.

Calendar Reform and Numbers

Among many other projects, I became interested in creating an Alphistian calendar that was more logical. This was after reading about the Julian and Gregorian calendars, and what other cultures in history used, such as in ancient Rome and Revolutionary France.

I came up with the simple scheme of 12 months of 30 days each, followed by an extra 5 days at the end of the year that were holidays. In leap year every 4 years, there would be an additional holiday. There were 73 weeks a year of 5 days each in my plan. I invented names for the days of the week and the months of the year out of whole cloth. That's why I can't remember a single name now. I made several of these calendars, all later discarded unfortunately, as was my adolescent custom.

About this time, I also created Alphistia's numbers. I used arabic numerals and only played around with other symbols haphazardly. When we studied base 12 numerical systems, I experimented with that too, but not very seriously, because I feared and was bored by math.

Alphistia's numbers were: hana (0) vond(1) du(2) tri(3) fratro(4) frazha(5) ses(6) septi(7) okti(8) nenia(9) dek(10) senti(100) tusant(1000) milyon(million). In modern Alphistian, these are: nul, an, tav, tre, vor, vet, ses, sevte, okte, nen, dek, senti(hundrad), mil(tosant) mileon.

First Alphistian Textbook

By 1970, I was largely using the Latin alphabet for Alphistian, although the oldest artifact I have is in Alphistian script. (see Kalierana document below). In the sixth grade, I found the spelling book we used to be a good model for a short grammar and textbook. I made ten lessons, made

vocabulary lists, introduced the elements of basic grammar, and included exercises. Considering I was only 12, this was quite a feat. One of my aunts complimented my efforts, and she wasn't one to do that very often.

Like so many examples of my creative output, this little book was discarded sometime before I went away to college. A real shame, because it would be a closely guarded treasure now.

Danny elected Spor

Alphistia had a king, called the Spor. I was the Spor, since I had created Alphistia, but sometime around 1971, I announced that we should have an election. Why I did not continue as absolute monarch and instead declare The Divine Right of Kings is still a mystery to me. Perhaps, as so often happens with kids (and adults for that matter), I just wanted to know if I was popular.

With the kids from Bardanste, Kim and Lisa, myself and a few other Putnam Street children, there must have been about ten eligible voters altogether. Moms and dads, adult neighbors and other kids on the street not interested weren't going to be involved, of course.

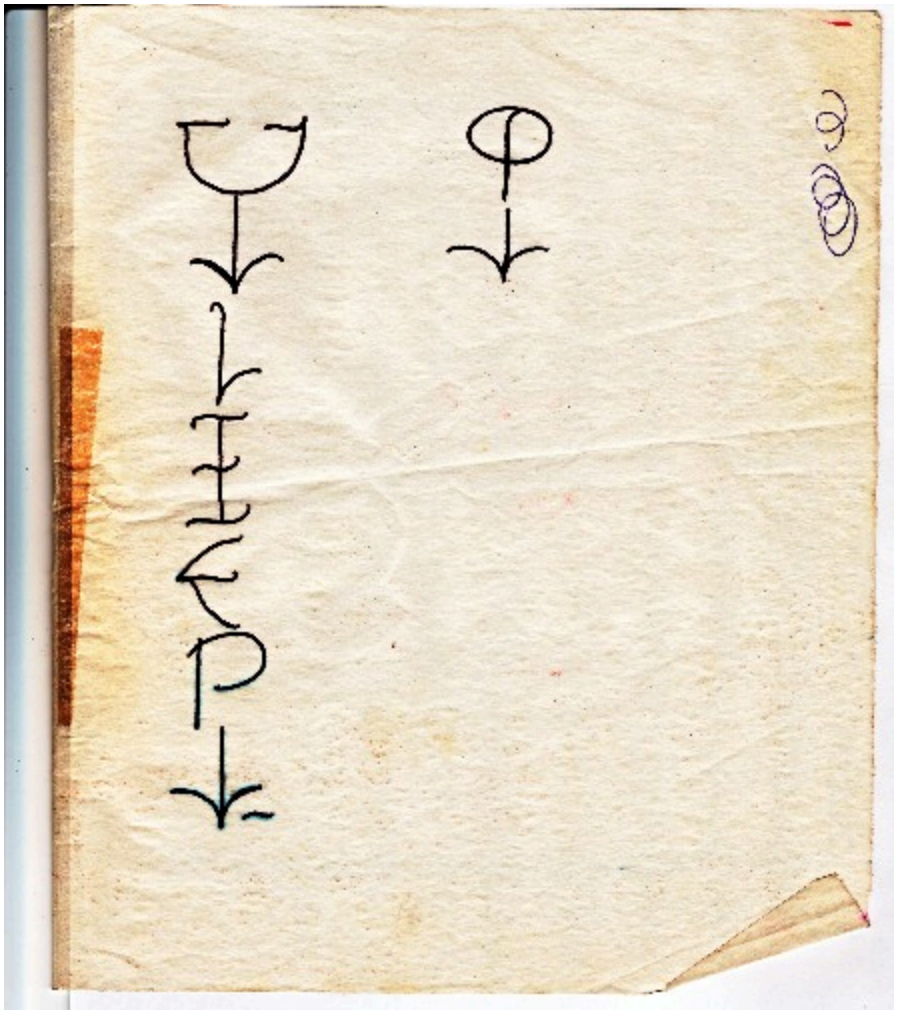
There was one other candidate: Danny from Bardanste. He was the smartest of all of us and carried himself like an adult, even as a child. I remember we each gave a campaign speech in Sakazhavesa's backyard, and then I handed out my handmade ballots. I put my name on top, like any machine politician would do.

And as Spor, I authorized myself to count the votes. It quickly became apparent that I was losing, and once I tallied up the total, it was clear I'd lost. So I cheated and declared myself the winner. Danny accepted the results graciously, but the masses grumbled. Within a few minutes, there was a rebellion. When the kids told each other who they voted for, it was clear Danny was the victor. And I was instantly deposed!

Danny was Spor for a few days but he was not interested in the job, really. Probably he did not want to bear the burden of ruling a country as an eight year old. So I got my crown back, and there was never an election again in the "real, existing" Alphistia of Putnam Street.

Kalierana document

When my mother died in 1988, my brother and I had to quickly pack up all her belongings from her house in Maysville. I was cleaning out the dresser in what had been my bedroom, and in one of the drawers, tucked under some linens, I came across a booklet with Alphistian lettering. My brother said he'd never before seen my eyes light up like that when I discovered this artifact. I vaguely remember making it, and I could see on the second page that I'd written it in "yer fratro" (year 4, so 1971). The Alphistian alphabet was not really in use by then, or so I had thought. The text was written out the way Chinese or Japanese characters were - vertically down the page instead of across it in horizontal lines. Only a few sentences were in Alphistian, but the rest of the text was English written with Alphistian letters.



Like many documents I'd made, this one was unfinished. It only had two pages of text, and was a political exhortation calling for unity and love of Alphistia. On the front page, the word "Kalierana" appears, but I have no recollection as to what it meant.

The "Kalierana" document is the oldest one extant. It has been very useful for providing a complete list of the letters in the Alphistian alphabet, and about 30 words in the Alphistian language. Although it came after the grammar/language book that I wrote in 1970 (now lost), it is clear that the alphabet had not yet fallen completely out of use.

Steel Building

The shantytown in the backyard was an eyesore. Whenever it rained, the cardboard refrigerator boxes I took from the garbage pile of a nearby appliance store sagged and then wilted like dead flowers.

In the spring of 1971, my mother decided to try to move the whole thing "indoors" by buying a 10 foot by 10 foot utility building from the Alden's catalog, a mail order company in Chicago. A shiny metal building was soon erected in the backyard. I was thrilled with the idea of my own space and decided to make the Steel Building my chapel. I was still quite a Catholic zealot, and

had a pile of songs and prayer books that I had made, some were even translated into Alphistian.

Unfortunately, a steel building attracts and retains heat. Whenever it was warm (and Northern Kentucky is warm or very hot seven months of the year), it was sweltering inside. It also leaked, so the chairs, tables, and religious pictures and statues were getting wet just like my cardboard constructions had. Before long, all the contents of my chapel went back into our house. My mother then stored some extra junk that would normally be put into a utility building. Soon enough, I was building shantytowns again in the part of the backyard that surrounded the steel building, defeating the whole purpose of getting it in the first place.

Hanky's Amerigo

Hanky lived across the street from our house, with his Holy Roller family. He was obsessed with the pop stars featured in Tiger Beat, and seemed to know all their stories, particularly Bobby Sherman and The Jackson Five. He also knew a lot more about movies and TV than I did. Usually we were not on very good terms, although we did go to see "The Planet of the Apes" together in 1968.

Hanky was not part of Alphistia most of the time, mostly because he didn't want to be, and perhaps because it wasn't his own invention. We were always rivals on the block. Hanky's house was never included as a province, although he'd show up now and then to see what we were doing . And at times, when the kids at Bardanste were feuding with me, Hanky would play

with them, providing plenty of diversions over at their house.

During one spat, Putnam Street suddenly had *two* made-up countries. Hanky created his own and not only the Bardanste kids joined up, but most of the other children on the block did too. He called his country “Amerigo” and Hanky did point out that this was because he modeled his invention on the greatest country in the world - America.

A large tent was constructed over at Bardanste, and there were even camp-outs. During a relaxation of tensions, I was invited over for a tour of the facilities. Their tent was sturdier and bigger than my huts, and had a canvas covering as a roof that kept out most of the rain. Amerigo did not last, but Hanky had his fun. I’m not sure what led to its demise; probably he got bored. He had a huge number of interests and hobbies, but he never had a “vision quest” like my own. It should be no surprise though that much later I learned he was also gay.

I discover the Cincinnati public library

I’ve mentioned that when I was seven, my mother took me to the Carnegie library on Monmouth Street in Newport and got me a library card. I was soon making my way to the library on my own, borrowing three books at a time, week after week. I went quickly from “One Fish, Two Fish” to the 900s in the Dewey Classification System. These were books about foreign countries and the various states in the US. I became very familiar with many of these books, especially a series called “Lands and Peoples”. I checked those out over and over. Of course, many ideas about Alphistia came from all this reading.

I saw an item in the local newspaper in that people living in Northern Kentucky’s Campbell, Kenton, and Boone counties could apply for a free library card at Cincinnati’s public library. This was because a federal grant made money available to pay for the cost of local residents to use the library system in a neighboring state. And that was because Kentucky did not provide adequate library service to its citizens. It was ranked near the bottom of the 50 states for library funding. My own county was atypical because it actually had a Carnegie library, even though it was neglected and underfunded. Many counties in the state didn’t even have that.

At some point in the spring of 1972, I made my way over to downtown Cincinnati and applied for a library card. I was stunned by the library’s main building at Race and Eighth Streets. It was HUGE! It had been built in the mid-1950s along modernist lines, with lots of glass and blond wood furniture, and it was overflowing with books. I couldn’t believe I had access to it all!

I went over to the library so often that my mother complained I was not being a well-rounded kid. That was definitely true but it made me so happy to be able to go to that library. I would walk from our house on Putnam St over to downtown Cincinnati several times a week. Finally I was told she’d give me bus fare to go once a week, but that I had to stop the long walk over the bridge. She was worried I’d get mugged, I suppose...which certainly was possible.

Until I graduated from high school and moved to Lexington in 1976 to start college, I was a frequent visitor at the library. I read dozens of books about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and much else besides. I borrowed my first books about Esperanto from there. I regularly read the propaganda magazines from the communist world, but not only those, but from France, Germany, Britain, India, South Africa, and Rhodesia too. I was constantly surprised at what I would discover. I still measure the quality of a public library by what I had access to in Cincinnati when I was in high school.

The First Alphistian Dictionary, Abridged

One of the books I found at the Cincinnati Public Library was “Esperanto: The World Interlanguage” which described itself as “six books in one”, including a short grammar and dictionary. I borrowed heavily from the dictionary to compile my own, which I wrote out by hand, binding the signatures together with dime-store Scotch tape. The cover was made out of red construction paper.

It was a treasure which I did not guard well. It was on my bookshelves through high school, and survived the move from Newport to Maysville, when my mother relocated in 1976. But along with a large pile of other materials, it all got tossed out when I was in college. My mom specifically asked me whether I wanted to keep a box full of Alphistiana she had under the bed up in her room, and I told her that I didn’t need it anymore. Obviously not one of my smartest decisions!

That collection included numerous artifacts that I would love to have now: many maps, a telephone book for Entiba, a novella, several issues of “New World” magazine - my knock-off of the Soviet Sputnik magazine (itself a knock-off of Reader’s Digest), and a mini-newspaper modeled on the New York Daily News. By 1978, I’d learned my lesson and since then, I’ve archived practically every scrap of paper that had anything at all to do with Alphistia.

Flag Worship

A very nice flag I designed flew in the backyard, rain or shine. It was modeled on the Olympic flag that I observed seeing the Munich games in 1972, but instead of five multi-colored rings, the Alphistian flag had three golden rings on a white field. It got dirty quickly constantly flying in the backyard, and my mom washed it, but then of course the Three Golden Rings weren’t visible anymore. It was just a white sheet again! So I colored in the rings once more and up it went.

I wanted all the citizens of Alphistia to gather together when we played in the backyard and salute the Alphistian flag, but the kids wouldn’t join in. Alphistian patriotism only went so far, and that wasn’t very far at all.

This opened a “debate” on whether we should respect the Alphistian flag, or love it. I had noticed that everyone seemed to LOVE the American flag, and I proposed that we should all at least respect the Alphistian flag. The idea of love for a flag bothered me, because even at that young age, I knew jingoism when I saw it. And the fact is, a lot of Americans are jingoistic,

especially in places like Kentucky. So I wrote up one of my handwritten newspapers, with a prominent essay called “Against Flag Worship”. I argued for mutual respect of the American and Alphistian flags.

That didn’t go over very well on Putnam Street, although the circulation of my newspaper was exactly one copy. I sent it over to the the kids in Bardanste, who then hung the American flag on their porch, The smartest of them (that would be Dan) told me that everyone should love the American flag. There would be no more discussion about worshipping flags either. Obviously his parents had gotten involved. I was at the losing end of this battle of course, although the Alphistian flag still flew in my backyard. It looked a bit like a flag of surrender when you couldn’t see the golden rings on it.

The Last Days of Entiba

The shantytown in the backyard was as elaborate as it ever was in its final incarnation. I built a “skyscraper” with four floors where you could look squarely into the bathroom window on the second floor of our house. The first two floors were an “apartments” for the denizens of Entiba.

Behind that was the Alphistian Department Store and the Hall of Records. Because of the heavy rainfalls in Kentucky, very few records could be kept there, and there was nothing to buy in the department store except a few plastic dishes. In that way, perhaps Alphistia had more in common with the Soviet socialist countries I was always reading about than I ever realized.

These shacks were quite an eyesore and I don’t know why the neighbors tolerated them, but there was never a single complaint. The town’s administration was so overrun by crooks in those days, that it’s doubtful much would have been done anyway. In hindsight, I can see these projects needed to be reined in by adult authority, and eventually my mother figured out how to do that.

Another one of my schemes involved creating my own filmstrips and “tv network”. My mother bought a $10 projector for me advertised in the hillbilly newspaper “Grit”, and when it arrived, I discovered that I could project just about any picture I wanted to onto a wall very easily. So I made my own Alphistian slide shows, with voice accompaniment on a little cassette tape recorder we had.

The projector was made in Italy, came in a colorful box labeled “EPISCOPIO” and I loved that toy! It heated up so much though it could’ve baked cookies like an Easy Bake Oven. I’m sure it was a fire hazard, but fortunately there were no mishaps. Years and years later I found one on ebay for $20.00, but have never used it because its overheating problems have only worsened over the decades.

I also took a shoebox, cut a “screen” into it and punctured the top to place rotating cylinders inside to attach my filmstrips to. By simply turning the cylinders you could “watch” my own Alphistian form of TV. This contraption I called “sanovision” which was a very unusual hybrid word using the Alphistian root “sae” (meaning “see”) and combining it with “vision”. So “seeing-vision”...some kind of tautology that only I could come up with.

Swimming pool

By the spring of 1973, my mother had had enough of the shantytowns. This probably came soon after my brother Mike complained that once when he looked out the bathroom window, I was waving to him at eye level from the top of the tower I’d built. Suddenly my mom started talking about getting a swimming pool. For around $200 she could put a 3 foot high circular pool in the backyard.

Sometime in May of that year, a neighbor that my mom hired to do odd jobs came over and hauled away the pieces of lumber, plastic sheeting, cardboard boxes, and all the rest of the junk I had accumulated to build the “real, existing” Alphistia in our yard. My mom had also given him the Steel Building, but he wasn’t ready to take that home yet. He moved it over to Becky Neal’s yard next door and in a few days he came back to set up the pool.

Summer of '73

That was the end of that: Alphistia no longer had any physical form. At the time I was seduced by the prospect of lounging in the pool during the upcoming summer, and didn't complain about losing my shanties. I got the chance to dive in once school let out right before Memorial Day.

Alphistia was dormant that summer. Since there was no longer a construction site in the yard, and I was sidetracked by working and the temptations of the pool, my adolescent mind could not focus on Alphistia.

Diary written in Alphistian

When school started in September 1973, I was in the homeroom of Mr. Fitzpatrick (he told us to call him "Fitz"). He was the school's most popular teacher and was known for his sarcasm and sense of humor. He could relate to a room full of pimply teen-aged boys and knew how to mix popular culture with the demands of the school curriculum. He would play rock music in class, the classroom was decorated with pop art posters, and he had large potted plants in the windows. He'd painted the room himself in bright primary colors. All the other classrooms were dull as dishwater - I know, because I painted them that color.

A few weeks after school started, a boy from the "B" Class was transferred to ours, for some unknown reason. His name was Mike, and I developed an enormous crush on him. Fortunately Mike never knew that. Newport Catholic was not the environment for a kid like me to let it be known that he had feelings for another boy. Instead, I started writing what I felt each day in a spiral notebook. I wrote in Alphistian.

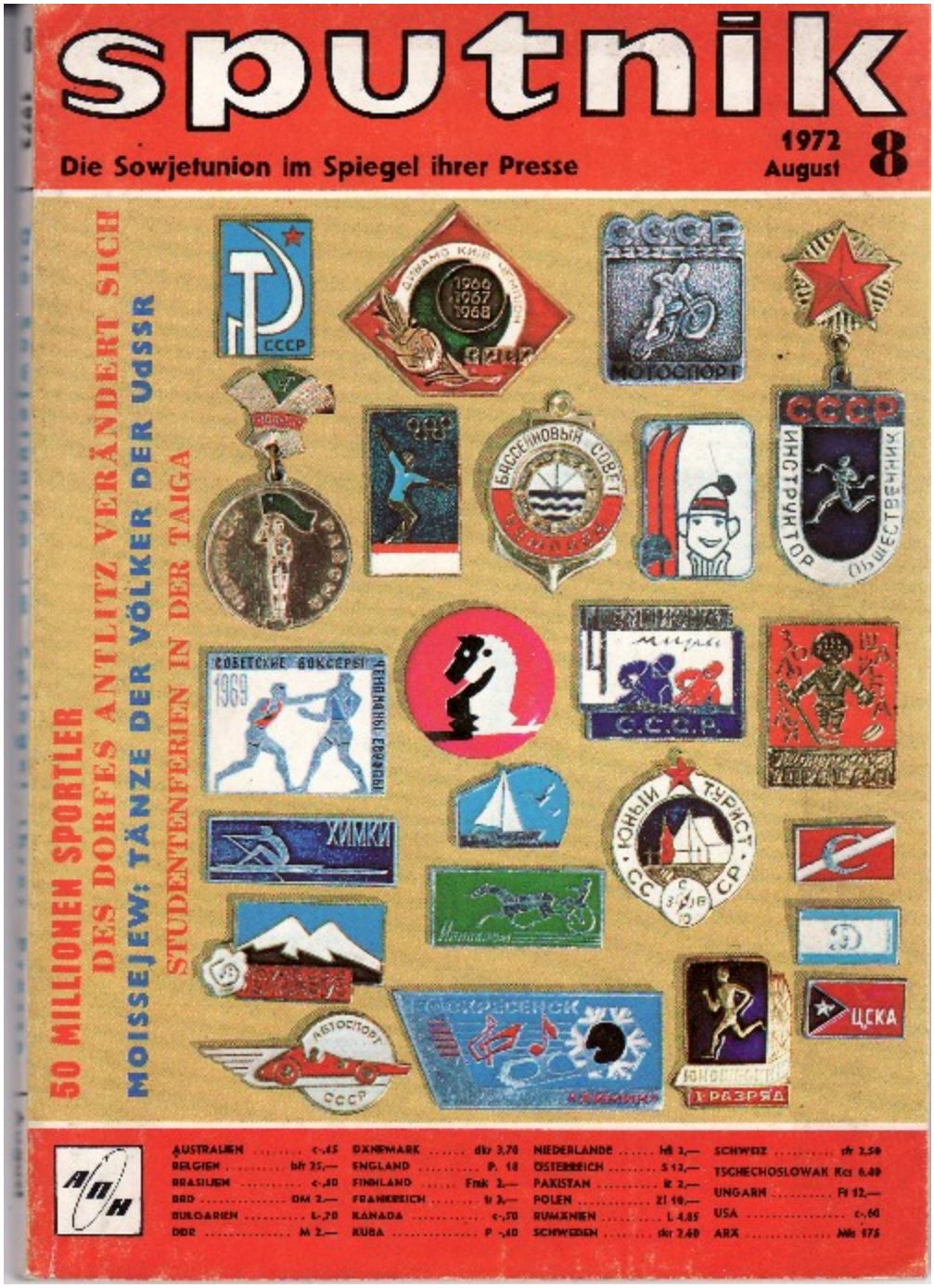
For months I poured out my feelings about this Mike, about how we could eventually become really, really good friends, through an act of God if nothing else, since I don't think I ever had a

single conversation with him. I had to invent a LOT of Alphistian words to express what I wanted to say. It was a masterpiece of teenage angst and language construction. Within a year though, I remember taking that notebook out to the garbage can in our side yard, ripping it up into tiny pieces, and throwing it all away. I was simply too embarrassed that I'd written all those thoughts, even if it was in a language that nobody but me could understand.

Subscriptions to Soviet magazines

Each day after school during my sophomore year, I worked in the cafeteria kitchen. This wasn't as bad the chain gang or the paint detail, but still was tough work. My task was to sweep and scrub the floors. I was told to lift up the heavy rubber mats all over the kitchen, scrub them, and then wash the floors underneath. Every day! After a week or two of that massive mess, I gave up and simply gave the mats and floor a good hosing each day, and damp mopped the linoleum floors. That took less than an hour. The rest of the time until I could go home at 5 pm, I spent making toast and drinking delicious whole fat milk while doing homework. Still, with the constant slogging around in water, I started to develop a mild case of trench foot. My feet were never dry, and my shoes were being destroyed little by little.

I remember one day while eating toast, I browsed through the catalog of Imported Publications, a company in Chicago that sold Soviet propaganda and took orders for Soviet magazines. I was normally not paid in cash at all for my labors, but for a few months of the year, I earned real money through the work/study program paid for by the Federal government.


sputnik
Die Sowjetunion im Spiegel ihrer Presse
1972 August 8
50 MILLIONEN SPORTLER
DES DORFES ANTLITZ VERÄNDERT SICH
MOISSEJEW: TÄNZE DER VÖLKER DER UdSSR
STUDENTENFERIEN IN DER TAIGA
СССР
МОТОСПОРТ
ИНСТРУКТОР ОБЩЕСТВЕННИК
СОВЕТСКИЕ БОКСЕРЫ
1969
ХИМКИ
ЮНЫЙ ТУРИСТ
ЦСКА
АВТОСПОРТ
1 РАЗРЯД
AUSTRALIEN c-,45 DÄNEMARK dkr 3,70 NIEDERLANDE hfl 3,— SCHWEIZ sfr 2,50
BELGIEN bfr 35,— ENGLAND P. 18 ÖSTERREICH S 12,— TSCHECHOSLOWAK Kcs 6.40
BRASILIEN c-,80 FINNLAND Fmk 2,— PAKISTAN R 2,— UNGARN Ft 12,—
BRD DM 2,— FRANKREICH fr 3,— POLEN zł 10,— USA c-,60
BULGARIEN L-,70 KANADA c-,70 RUMÄNIEN L 4,85 ARX Mk 175
DDR M 2,— KUBA P -,40 SCHWEDEN skr 2,40

According to my social security earnings record, I made $240 in 1972, $252 in 1973 and $320 in 1974. That princely sum in 1974 meant that I had a small amount of spending money of my own, for the first time in my life. What I didn't spend on clothes (I even bought a pair of Earth Shoes and fashionable aviator wire-rimmed glasses) I used to subscribe to Soviet periodicals and buy some books about life in Russia. I probably spent $50.00 on all of them, but subscriptions to magazines like "Sputnik" were only $5.00. So I splurged, subscribing to "New Times"(a poor imitation of Newsweek or Time), "Soviet Woman", "Culture and Life" (one of the

dullest magazines ever published) and a general glossy called “Soviet Union”. And since it was so cheap, I also added “Moscow News”, a turgid weekly. Soon our mailbox was full of these various exotic publications. They even smelled different than American magazines - the ink and the rough wrapping paper were aromatic in a way very unlike The Cincinnati Enquirer or Reader’s Digest.

I haven’t checked, but these subscriptions possibly led to a file on me at the Cincinnati branch office of the FBI. It was the Cold War and J. Edgar Hoover was still conducting witch hunts, after all. More than likely, it was simply noted that a teen-ager at a Catholic high school was subscribing to communist magazines. I was never bothered and neither was anyone I knew.

And just for fun, I also subscribed to the Finnish version of Reader’s Digest. I never understood a word in any issue, but month after month it arrived. From the ads for French cars and Scandinavian appliances and furniture though, it seemed like Finland was far advanced as far as taste and design goes, compared either to Newport Kentucky...or the USSR.

To completely vex the FBI, I also subscribed to “China Reconstructs” and “Peking Review”. China was then overwhelmed by Mao’s Cultural Revolution. The articles were deadly dull, but at least in “China Reconstructs”, the photos were spectacularly colorful.

Most of these magazines gathered dust once the novelty wore off. The communist press was not known for its scintillating articles. The full-color photo spreads and various propaganda charts and diagrams were fascinating to me though. Those influenced the creation of an “Alphistian aesthetic” - colorful but non-commercial in design and form.

Peking Opera

In 1972, Nixon visited China, setting the way for America to outsource most of its manufacturing to a communist country, decades later. But in 1972, China was terra incognita for Americans, and that included me! I soon started reading everything I could on the country, and was fascinated with the culture, especially the excesses of the Cultural Revolution.

Sometime in 1973, cultural exchanges began, and I saw on channel 48
(Cincinnati’s public tv station) a performance of “The Red Detachment of Women”. It was a kitschy revolutionary opera that mimicked the traditional Peking Operas, which were banned. But I didn’t know anything about that...I simply was captivated by the music and dancing. In my mind’s eye, that included the brilliant colors and many red flags flying, but we only had black and white tv in our house, so that wasn’t possible.

One song that popped up several times turned out to be the revolutionary song “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman” which praised Mao to the skies as indispensable to all aspects of life. It had a very catchy tune, and for weeks I hummed and played it on my $1 plastic

recorder from Kresges. The tune became the national anthem for Alphistia, and I wrote lyrics in both Alphistian and English. I can only remember a bit of either but it started:

Thme al de praviki, fa tlaz uz vela leshenum(rest forgotten)
March all ye peoples, for this is our native land. Win the final victory, for one land, for Alphistia!

I remember singing this in the backyard and being stared at by a toddler in a neighboring yard, shocked at a chubby 15 year old hopping around and singing gibberish. She might remember the tune herself 40 years later as well as I do, because it was as good as any pop tune.

Communists on Putnam Street

Alphistia's everyday existence was on the wane and there were a number of flare-ups with the kids in Bardanste that seemed to indicate that it would be better if Alphistia became entirely virtual. During one fracas, I wrote another edition of an Alphistian newspaper, full of anger at Bardanste. I said they were like "like communists" in their attitude to ideas about Alphistia. I didn't send it to them, but to their next door neighbor.

She was a gossip and of course told everyone that I was calling people communists. My only defense was that I said the family in Bardanste were behaving "like" commies. That didn't work! The gossip told me she burned my newspaper, and for a while practically nobody on the street would talk to me. That happened all the time to everyone anyway, since the people on our block picked fights with each other over very minor things and half the street wasn't talking to the other half most of the time. But the rebuke was genuine and stinging.

It was 1973, the Cold War was still raging, and I was obsessed with life in Soviet Russia and Red China. I was 15 years old and not a communist myself, but some kind of teenaged fellow-traveler. Nobody on the street seemed to care about any of that, they just didn't like having a kid calling a family on the block commies. And for all my criticism of the culture of inward-looking parochialism of where I grew up, the poorly-educated provincials of Putnam Street were right. I didn't do anything like that again.

Mrs Martin

Down the street from us was a pretty little cottage where an older woman named Nellie Martin lived with her son, David. They were "country people" from somewhere down in the Appalachians. Real hillbillies. He had bought the house for her and fixed it up on his own. He was a car mechanic and was known for being the best at repairing foreign cars in Northern Kentucky. He worked a lot, drank a lot, and slept a lot, and hardly said a word to anybody except his mom.

She however, was a talker. I got to know Mrs Martin because she would sit on her front stoop in a flowered house dress, smoking cigarettes constantly, chatting with any neighbor that passed by. She had an opinion about everything, including politics. When she wasn't on her stoop, she was at her kitchen table, chain smoking, watching tv, or reading downmarket magazines like

“True” or the “National Enquirer”. I would stand at her kitchen door and talk to her for an hour at a time, including about Alphistia. She was an expert at giving advice, even if her advice was never expert.

Alphistia in 1973 was no longer a shanty town in the backyard, but it still existed, although barely. The citizens were in constant rebellion, especially over at Bardanste. We were all in, or getting close to puberty, and that only contributed to Alphistian angst.

Finally Mrs. Martin suggested we all meet in her backyard for a discussion to air out our differences. Surprisingly we all agreed. She tried her best to be a peacemaker, a hillbilly Dr. Kissinger. It didn’t work, and I remember her high pitched voice trying to calm us down with “Wait a minute! Hold on right there!” In the end, she just said “You know what? You should all just break up Alphistia” That was actually good advice, and is exactly what happened.

A Growing Archive

From 1974, I started to preserve some of the artifacts I was making - certainly not everything, but there are documents from then that I still have today.

One of them was based on the Novosti Press Agency Yearbook “USSR - 1972”. That means it was turgid beyond belief. It is about 60 pages of handwritten script describing Alphistia as it was in 1973-74.
It is called “The UPA: Seven Years of Great Progress”. (UPA stood for The United Provinces of Alphistia”.)

This is what I wrote on page three: “Alphistia is a fantasy nation. It does not pretend to be real, because we know that certain problems arise if we say it is.” Other parts are too adolescent to quote, and its solipsism is concerning to a modern reader.

In reality, Alphistia at this time was no longer “for the kids”. But I described it in my booklet as though Barbara, Danny, and Steve still participated, as well as Kim, Lisa, and Gene, and a few others on the street. After the “First Congress of the UPA” was held in Nellie Martin’s backyard in July 1973, there really was no active participation anymore. It was all just me. The shanty towns were gone, the role playing was over, and so were the disagreements. From this time onward, Alphistia was completely virtual. That meant my imagination could blossom even more. And it did!

For the last two years in high school, I created quite a lot of Alphistian documents. One that did not survive unfortunately, was a little novella that I wrote: a kind of Alphistian Harlequin Romance. Two people fall in love, one of them dies from an unknown illness. The last line (which I still remember) was: “Whatever Mika had, I have too.”

Mika was a boy...the narrator “I”...was a boy. In my mind, my novella was about two young men. Others just assumed that Mika was a woman’s name. I even remember Barb referring to Mika

as “she”, which surprised me. Of course I kept silent about it.

Virtual Alphistia

I also began making maps of Alphistia. At first, they consisted of an Alphistia with three provinces: Sakazhavesa, Tava, and Usta. Usta was up north, then Sakazhavesa in the middle and Tava to the south or west. These were “The Three Golden Rings”. The total “population” was 5,000 souls (I refer to souls but there was nobody else of course).

Alphistia was a world in miniature, just like the small scale of my shantytowns. When I made my huts in the backyard, you could never stand upright in them. They were little tent-like structures or shacks that you squatted in. And that was how I designed the buildings in Alphistia. Of course in reality that would cause disabilities in the muscles and bones of the population very quickly. I soon moved on to drawing buildings for normal-sized sitting and standing.

All the cars in Alphistia were designed to be bicycles, where one or two people could sit like they were in cars. They would be pedal powered with a plastic car-like body with doors, windows, and a steering wheel. I’d seen a design for one in a magazine and loved it. (I still think they’d be a clever way to get around.)

In 1975, I spotted a little book that was a statistical handbook for Poland at the Cincinnati public library’s annual book sale. I snapped it up. It had a little map inside of all the counties in Poland, which are called “voivodships”. Soon Alphistia had a completely new geography, modeled (just a little) on Poland’s. There were now 11 provinces instead of only three.

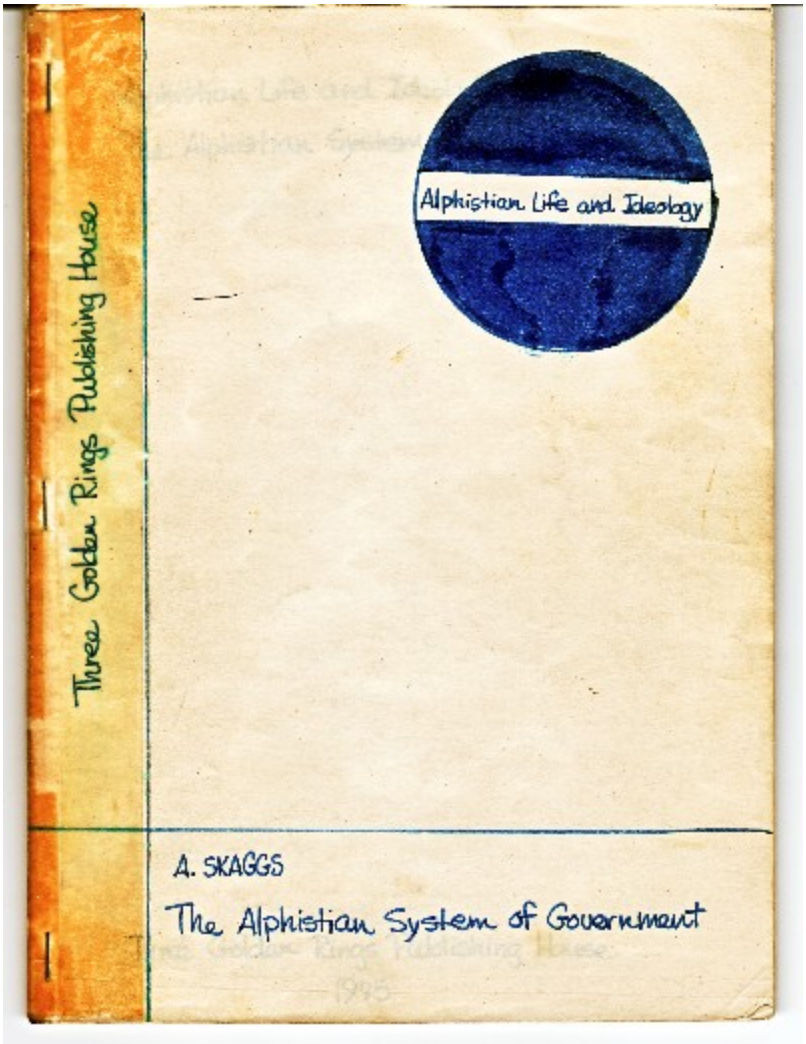
I had read that if you wrote the “Cultural Attache” of foreign embassies in Washington, they would send you maps and booklets for free about their homelands. I wrote to the embassies of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Russia. I got back big packets that kept me fascinated for months.

I also tried to find a (boy) penpal abroad, especially from a communist country. The Russians didn’t play that game, but the Poles allowed contact with the decadant West. I wrote a penpal agency and months later I heard from a girl, not a boy. She was my age, named Ilona. She lived in southern Poland, in the voivodship of Opole, in a town called Krapkowice. I asked her in the first letter whether she would like to have a souvenir from the USA. She replied quickly via airmail. Yes, of course she’d like a souvenir - CIGARETTES! Could I send a carton of cigarettes to her, please? I couldn’t do it, the idea shocked me. I sent her a handicraft doll instead(!) She did send me some postcards of her town and a little book about Krakow, which wasn’t far from where she lived. Altogether I got four or five letters over the course of a year, but as usually happens, the letters eventually stopped. She probably found a boyfriend or a better supplier of cigarettes.

The Klava Theory

1975 was a very active time for Alphistia. During spring break in March, I wrote my first real

book, a 64 page treatise called “The Alphistian System of Government”. It is written by hand on folded 8.5 by 11 typing paper, cropped so that each page size was 5.5 inches by 7.25 inches. I stapled it together with a tiny Swingline stapler. The 34 double-sided sheets were barely held together by my expert stapling.



Somehow this artifact has survived for 40 plus years. I wrote it in black magic marker in my best Catholic school penmanship. I copied Mr. Fitzpatrick’s block style writing that resembled printed text instead of the cursive that I was carefully taught by the nuns in grade school. The front cover has a blue circle which identified the book as part of the “Alphistian Life and Ideology” series. There were no follow-ups, although in the text itself, I mention another book already written called “After Klava” (no such book actually existed). Klava was a word that I made at this time that meant “downfall”. I wrote on page 46 a definition of the term:

“If Klava occurs, it is believed that civilization will have been destroyed
and anarchy would reign. It would mean many people would be killed, or if living, would be in

the worst kind of misery. From this sea of anarchy, an island of civilization might evolve, and it could be Alphistia."

Alphistia then, would not be a backyard nation in the future, but a survivor's homeland. In those days, the most likely scenario for the Downfall of Civilization was of course, nuclear annihilation. But I never went into the details of what would cause the Klava, and in reading these lines again in the booklet I wrote 40 years ago, I was surprised to see that I even referred to people dying as a result of a social collapse. My focus has always been not the details of causes, but what would come after i.e., Alphistia.

"The Alphistian System of Government" is surprisingly detailed in its descriptions of how Alphistia should be administered, with chapters on the Premier (I was no longer using the word Spor), the parliament (I did still use the word Kilreti), the ministries, courts, and local government. I also outlined the national ideology of a mixed-economy and a social-democratic model of a cradle-to-the-grave welfare state.

I described Alphistia as an extremely small place in size and population, consisting of just three provinces: Saka, Tava, and Usta. The population for each province would be somewhere between 300-400 people to a maximum of 2,000. That would be a total national population of about 900-1,200 to 6,000 at the most. Soon after that though, I bought the Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland for 1967 at the library book sale, which inspired me on many levels, primarily because of its map. Alphistia soon had 11 provinces, and its population was at least 10,000.

I did not elaborate where exactly Alphistia was in my booklet, although in sources I no longer have, I remember that I referred to it being somewhere in the foothills of the Appalachians, with the ruins of Cincinnati far enough away to keep unwanted visitors out, but which could still be reached for scavenging unused goods from the olden times. I referred to these as "imports" in the "Alphistian System of Government", with a government ministry devoted to retrieving such goods and making them usable again.

Other Alphistian artifacts

Aside from the government booklet, little else that I made has survived from then. There is a "term paper" I wrote about a small rural village which I called Tepetela. It was in Branoe province, four miles south of Entiba. I described a village that had seen much deprivation, and which was still recovering from the effects of the Klava. The four miles to Entiba were perceived as a great distance, since a motorized society was largely a thing of the past.

There is also an elaborate list of government employees in Entiba that has survived, but the short white-pages telephone directory I made for the capital did not. None of the maps that depicted the original three provinces have survived, and the earliest maps of the 11 provinces date from the summer of 1977.

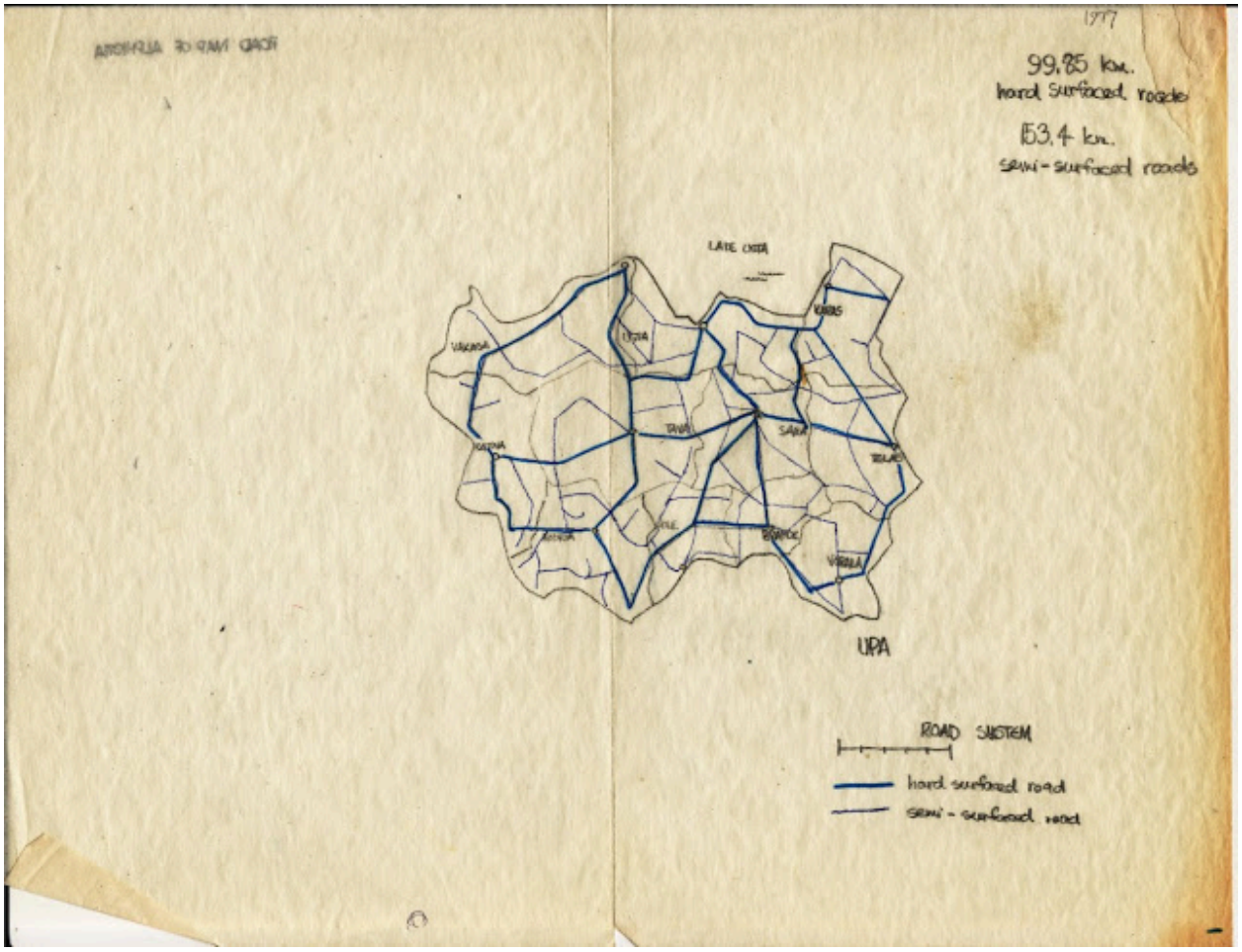
Sometime in late 1975 or early 1976 I made a panoramic drawing of all the buildings on the west side of Three Golden Rings Avenue, Entiba's main street. That has survived and is full of detail of what I imagined the capital was like. The pedal cars of 1974-75 are gone, and there are regular compact sedans and minivans on the streets. I named the only make of Alphistia's cars the "Supra". Of course, I should have trademarked that name. In 1978, Toyota started selling cars called the Supra that became very popular all over the world.

1975-76 was a very busy school year, with classes, work at the Drive-In Market, and hanging out with "The Group". Not a lot of Alphistiana was going on until the summer of '76. Then I had a little free time I wrote a little booklet in August. It was the Constitution of Alphistia and I still have it. It was the best of the American and Soviet constitutions. The 1936 so-called "Stalin Constitution" was a good one, even if it was violated in every way (which is was!) But as a model it was well-organized and well-written.

Off to College

In late August, 1976 I moved to Lexington to start college at the University of Kentucky. This changed my life completely! I was in an environment where I was with other educated people who had intellectual interests. I was constantly learning new things, and spent many hours exploring the university library.

Considering all these stimuli of college life, it was remarkable I did as much as I did on my Alphistia projects. During the summer of 1977 and during my sophomore year, I was very productive. I made two maps of Alphistia, a detailed city map of Entiba with all its buildings, drew a panoramic map of the University of Alphistia's campus, and compiled a gazetteer of all the country's settlements. All these documents have survived.



It was obvious that living in Lexington inspired some of my geographical output. When I drew the panorama of the university campus, it was obviously inspired by the pretty University of Kentucky campus. Lexington is surrounded by “New Circle Road”, and Entiba’s detailed map also had a ring road. Living in the suburban area in the south of the city my first semester also influenced the creation of cul-de-sacs and single family housing areas in Entiba. This was the only time though that Alphistia ever went down the “dead end” roads of suburbia.

Although I was studying Russian now, as had been my goal for years, there were not so many Russian or Soviet influences on my Alphistian projects. I did borrow a few words for Alphistian vocabulary, but during this period I was not concentrating on developing the language to a great degree anyway. In the drawings I made of Entiba and other Alphistian towns, I did include many small apartment buildings that looked to be made of prefabricated panels, which were very common in the Soviet bloc. Otherwise, Alphistian cities were not unlike what was familiar to me locally. There were even shopping malls. Once I visited New York City in the summer of 1978, that was all I needed to know that Alphistia’s towns would be very urban.

At this point, I will finish this volume describing Alphistia’s first 10 years. The second volume will

pick up with my visit to New York, and the many changes that happened resulting from that eye-opening trip.

(November 2016)